

Against the Grain

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Library Serials Vendor Relationships: The Human Element



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The relationship between a library and serials vendor has been written about by many authors of late — **Bosch, Tucker, Sugnet & Corbett** (2011); **Davis, England, Feick, Steinkle & Ripley** (2016); **Ostergaard & Rossmann** (2016); and **Rovner** (2017) to name a few. However, the human element of the serials vendor's relationship with the library has not been emphasized. This article focuses on the personal aspects of the relationship between the vendor and the library confirming the relationship ultimately helps to streamline and improve library workflows. These library/serials vendor relationships are steeped in communication, sharing, collaboration, trust, and mutual respect.

Serials vendors can function as an extension of the library's staff. Vendors have staff and, in many cases, dedicated customer service representatives in place to respond to library inquiries and/or solve problems libraries encounter with subscriptions. The serials vendor assists with order details such as current pricing quotes and the myriad of title-change notifications. Many vendors provide serials management systems for their libraries. The kinds of problems vendors handle with serials subscriptions can range from claiming missing issues, invoice discrepancies or need for proof of payment, credits owed, and access issues.

The serials vendor's traditional role is to assist libraries as the liaison between the library and the publisher. Hence, the serials vendor aids in the library's workflow intervening when necessary to track down a response. Customer service is a phone call, email, and, in some cases, a customer portal away. Still, some might ask, how does this streamline my workflow? The vendor, acting in their capacity, intervenes on behalf of the library with publishers and fulfillment houses to claim missing issues, with platform providers to provide better linking and access, and even in some cases troubleshoot with ILS vendors to solve issues to save the library staff time and money. Further, library serials vendors often employ librarians to understand the basic and nuanced needs of libraries when dealing with these third parties.

Communication is a primary means of connecting people. Communication is a large part of what serials vendors do. Subscription agents communicate with various players in the industry as a result of relationships built over many years of doing business. These contacts include publishers and content providers, platform providers, ILS/LMS vendors, and standards organizations. The trade of information, as it is handled by the serials vendor, benefits libraries in that it assures best practices are followed. Open dialogs need to take place between the serials vendor and these other players for the vendors to best manage library needs. Communication, however, must

go both ways. When issues arise for libraries, it is often a result of a lack of communication or untimely communication. If vendors cannot get in touch with the responsible party, they cannot resolve issues.

Good communication goes hand in hand with vendor relationships. Serials vendors are judged on their ability to communicate in a timely manner. Lack of communication could indicate there are gaps in the relationship. A serials vendor needs to be more engaged in building and maintaining open communication with all parties. The constraints of library procedures and policies demand that serials vendors do so. Lack of communication can leave open-ended questions about a problem order, incomplete data and perhaps incomplete records on the library end, failed claims, access lapses, or unfilled order requests. There is nothing worse for a library than not being able to put closure to a serials problem, complete a subscription run for binding, or provide adequate access coverage to an online subscription for faculty in an online course environment. Such instances can put the library in a position of being fiscally irresponsible to the university and library mission. Serials are by nature problematic and vendors do not want to add to this complication.

Communication is a primary reason why the serials vendor visits libraries. Library visits for most vendors are mandatory but are done not only to sell products and services but also to keep librarians abreast of what is happening in their industry. The visits give library contacts a time to hear what is new on the horizon, to learn about services the library is currently not using, which may solve some problem they have, and most importantly, give the library the opportunity to tell the vendor what they can do better. The library visit, if used correctly, can benefit both sides and perhaps be an impetus to enhance library workflows. Vendors return from a library visit with the tools to improve upon an existing relationship with the library.

A serials vendor can provide a library with a plethora of data useful to library management requirements. Libraries have very specific information needs. Serials vendors accumulate data such as pricing, statistics on percentages of price increases, inflation rates, holdings data, claims, and other historical data. Accuracy is of key importance concerning data, as is the vendor's requirement to understand the information need the library is trying to fill. Serials vendors work with contacts in the publishing industry to add the most up-to-date information to their serials management systems. Additionally, they ensure checks and balances are in place to provide accurate and current information in their customer facing systems. Supplying accurate data is a large undertaking for vendors, but providing accurate data on demand helps with providing better service

to the library. The key to collecting data is keeping it organized. Serials vendors provide a level of organization in their title files, renewal lists, and invoices to assist libraries in their work. A library serials vendor may be able to help with providing MARC records for library catalogs. It is important for the vendor to keep in mind that libraries are comprised of highly data oriented and organized individuals and the provision of data on demand is once again saving that library in staff time.

Cooperation and collaboration can increase the possibility for success when people come together to work on a task. Collaboration with the serials vendor is another part of the human element. Development of new products and services is a driving force in a competitive library serials vendor industry. There have been numerous collaboration projects between libraries and serials vendors over the years and this is a continuing effort on the part of vendors. Some serials vendors have engaged in building products or systems with key input from their user base. Library serials vendors have also been known to engage in beta tests with select groups of libraries. Not only do these methods engage libraries through an inclusive process in building a system or platform, but it is a tremendous benefit to the vendor to have library development partners. Library partnerships in such projects are invaluable and produce a means for an ongoing form of feedback. Serials vendors do several things to elicit library feedback. Some of these methods include surveys, user groups, focus groups, and onsite visits, all of which add to the personal touch. Additionally, partnerships such as beta testing help the library get what they want in a system. It also helps the vendor give the library what they want and not what they think they need.

Collaboration efforts can also be seen at the many library conferences serials vendors attend, promote, sponsor, and take part in presentations. Vendors participate in national and local library events and conferences, partnering in a wide variety of library professional development endeavors with their library colleagues. Joint presentations alongside vendors can expand the librarian's presence in the library community, help them get promoted or achieve personal goals, and may move them closer toward tenure goals if in a tenure track position. At a more overarching level, it is good to hear various perspectives during a presentation, which is why such library/vendor partnerships at conferences are encouraged. While this relationship does not necessarily enhance or streamline workflows, it is adding something to the skill set of those involved and thrusting the librarian into new situations and potential research opportunities. There is a networking aspect here that

continued on page 25

should not be overlooked, and contacts made at conferences can prove valuable for the library in the future.

Honesty can make or break a relationship. Trust and honesty are also part of the relationship between libraries and serials vendors. Libraries need to trust that their serials vendor is staying abreast of industry changes and has accurate data since change is inevitable in serials work, whether it is a simple title change or a title moving from one package to another. The world of vendors is a competitive one and sometimes the relationship with a library can put a serials vendor over the top in a vendor choice decision on the part of the library. Most importantly, serials vendors have an ethical obligation to be open and honest about financial viability. This honesty not only improves but assures long term relationships between the library and the serials vendor.

It is a mutual benefit for serials vendors and libraries to have a positive relationship. **Rossmann** (2016) surveyed libraries about their relationships with vendors and an average of five or more people at the library have contacts with vendors. Vendors have a real presence in libraries. Stating vendors and librarians are friends is cliché. Libraries pay for their services. However, many serials-vendor relationships are akin to friendship and there is a level of mutual respect. Libraries rely on serials vendors to have the knowledge to help them find the right products and services and to connect them to resources for what their users want. Libraries and their serials vendors know a lot about one another going into the relationship. This knowledge is the basis of a long term healthy relationship. The important elements of the personal touch — communication, collaboration, trust and honesty, and mutual respect — ensure that the library workflows are efficient and moving in the right direction in this ever-changing world of serials. These are just a few of the ways the human element in the library/vendor relationship can be employed to enhance library workflow. 🌱

Author's Note: These comments are my opinion and not necessarily the opinion of all serials vendors. — **BA**

Doing More with Less ...
from page 22

Endnotes

1. **Roth, P., & Daniels, J.** (2014). Doing more with less: Exploring batch processing and outsourcing in academic libraries. In *Proceedings of the Charleston Library Conference*. Paper from presentation at **Charleston Conference**, Charleston S.C. (2014).

Booklover — One Day

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Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn is one of the **Nobel Laureates** whose name recognition is huge. In spite of the weightiness of his subject matter and the efforts made to subdue him and his works, this is quite an accolade. Truth: in drilling down the list of **Nobel Literature Laureates**, I have been skipping over his name as I have found it daunting to tackle his work. It is January 2019, time to get over it and check a book out of the library. I found two pieces of his work at the main branch of the **Charleston County Library**. *Cancer Ward* and *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* were wedged between *Blood and Milk* by **Sharon Solwitz**, a Pushcart Prize recipient, and *Chum*, *A Novel* by **Jeff Somers**. Association by alphabetical order is quirky and interesting to me — just something to ponder.

One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, is my choice maybe because the book is only 159 pages and that seems doable to overcome daunting, or maybe because the book has a woven gold thread bookmark — a delightful accent for a library book. Another delight, it was a fast, entertaining and amazing read. But I jump ahead.

Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn won the 1970 **Nobel Prize in Literature** “for the ethical force with which he has pursued the indispensable traditions of Russian literature.”

The intensity that surrounded his life began in the womb. His mother, **Taisiya Shcherbak (née) Solzhenitsyn** was widowed shortly after learning of her pregnancy.

Born in 1918 in Kislovodsk, Russia, he was raised by his mother and an aunt in very humble circumstances. Nevertheless, **Taisiya** was an educated woman and encouraged **Solzhenitsyn's** studies in literature and science. **Solzhenitsyn** married in 1940 while at university. Five years later, he would be arrested while serving in the Red Army in East Prussia for writing derogatory comments in communications with his friends. This would escalate to charges of creating anti-Soviet propaganda under Article 58, paragraph 10 of the criminal code. In July of 1945 he was sentenced to work camps for eight years. His experience in the camp located in Ekibastuz, Kazakhstan was the experiential “inspiration” behind *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, the novella published in 1962 — interesting that this was my choice.

John Bayley's introduction presents the reader a beautiful ten-page window into this quasi-autobiographical work: “For the greatest strength of *Ivan Denisovich* is its exemplary force, its total commitment to a vital and heroic purpose. Russian speakers, readers of *Novy Mir*, were at once bowled over by the confidence, forcefulness and brilliance

of its style, a wholly new amalgam of simple Russian narrative (**Daniel Defoe's** *Robinson Crusoe* affords us some sort of English parallel) blended with colloquialisms, pungent slang and prison-camp jargon, the whole giving that unmistakable impression of the new which is decisive in the authority of a literary masterpiece of this kind. Ordinary reportage about the real nature of the camp system would have had some effect on the reading public, of course; but the shock achieved by **Solzhenitsyn** was a literary shock as well as a social one.” He continues.... “There is something altogether admirable about **Solzhenitsyn's** obsession with discovering what went wrong in Russia, and devoting his great literary talents to an elaborate postmortem. Yet it must also be admitted that *The Red Wheel* was, in a sense, out of date before it appeared, whereas *Ivan Denisovich* still has the air of changeless freshness — the shock of the present — which it had when it first broke upon the Russian public.”

H.T. Willetts provided the English translation for *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* as well as a few other of **Solzhenitsyn's** works.

Now for a few intriguing excerpts of **Ivan Denisovich Shukhov's** day from the early morning when he rises to eat, then assembles for the morning work detail, to the minutia of the arduous labor, assembling to return for the evening mess, and then to retire. Every detail and thought is shared.

“Can a man who's warm understand one who's freezing? The frost was cruel. A stinging haze wrapped around him and set him coughing. The air temperature was twenty-seven below and **Shukhov's** temperature was thirty-seven above. No holds barred!”

“For two months the Power Station had stood abandoned, a grey skeleton out in the snow. But now Gang 104 had arrived. What kept body and soul together in these men was a mystery. Canvas belts were drawn tight round empty bellies. The frost was cracking merrily. Not a warm spot, not a spark of fire anywhere. All the same — Gang 104 had arrived, and life was beginning all over again.”

“**Shukhov** was eating his supper without bread: two portions with bread as well would be a bit too rich. The bread would come in useful tomorrow. The belly is an ungrateful wretch, it never remembers past favours, it always wants more tomorrow.”

“The end of an unclouded day. Almost a happy one.

Just one of the three thousand six hundred and fifty-three days of his sentence, from bell to bell. The extra three were for leap years.”

The day is over. 🌱

